

Rhetorical Situation and Kairos

Lloyd F. Bitzer described the concept of the rhetorical situation in his essay of the same name.¹ The concept relies on understanding a moment called "exigence," in which something happens, or fails to happen, that compels one to speak out. For example, if the local school board fires a popular principal, a sympathetic parent might then be compelled to take the microphone at the meeting and/or write a letter to the editor. Bitzer defined the rhetorical situation as the "complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence."

Some elements of the rhetorical situation include:

1. **Exigence:** What happens or fails to happen? Why is one compelled to speak out?
2. **Persons:** Who is involved in the exigence and what roles do they play?
3. **Relations:** What are the relationships, especially the differences in power, between the persons involved?
4. **Location:** Where is the site of discourse? e.g. a podium, newspaper, web page, etc.
5. **Speaker:** Who is compelled to speak or write?
6. **Audience:** Who does the speaker address and why?
7. **Method:** How does the speaker choose to address the audience?
8. **Institutions:** What are the rules of the game surrounding/constraining numbers 1 through 7.

Analyzing the rhetorical situation (which, at its most fundamental, means identifying the elements above) can tell us much about speakers, their situations, and their persuasive intentions.

The ancient Greeks gave special attention to timing--the "when" of the rhetorical situation. They called this *kairos*, and it identifies the combination of the "right" moment to speak and the "right" way (or proportion) to speak. Let's get back to the school board example. After voting to fire the popular principal, the sympathetic parent might grab the microphone and scream invectives at the board. This would be bad *kairos*. Perhaps a better choice would be to recognize that a mild rebuke fits the situation followed by a well-timed letter to the editor or column in the school newsletter.

Tropes and Schemes

In classical rhetoric, the tropes and schemes fall under the canon of style. These stylistic features certainly do add spice to writing and speaking. And they are commonly thought to be persuasive because they dress up otherwise mundane language; the idea being that we are persuaded by the imagery and artistry because we find it entertaining. There is much more to tropes and schemes than surface considerations. Indeed, politicians and pundits use these language forms to create specific social and political effects by playing on our emotions.

Note: Some examples from "Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student" by Edward P. J. Corbett.

Definitions:

Trope: The use of a word, phrase, or image in a way not intended by its normal signification.

Scheme: A change in standard word order or pattern.

Tropes and schemes are collectively known as **figures of speech**. The following is a short list of some of the most common figures of speech. I have selected figures that politicians and pundits use often--especially schemes of repetition and word order, which convey authority.

Anaphora: A scheme in which the same word or phrase is repeated at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences. Example: "I will fight for you. I will fight to save Social Security. I will fight to raise the minimum wage."

Anastrophe: A scheme in which normal word order is changed for emphasis. Example: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

Antithesis: A scheme that makes use of contrasting words, phrases, sentences, or ideas for emphasis (generally used in parallel grammatical structures). Example: " Americans in need are not strangers, they are citizens, not problems, but priorities."

Apostrophe: A scheme in which a person or an abstract quality is directly addressed, whether present or not. Example: "Freedom! You are a beguiling mistress."

Epistrophe: A scheme in which the same word is repeated at the end of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences. Example: "I believe we should fight for justice. You believe we should fight for justice. How can we not, then, fight for justice?"

Hyperbole: A trope composed of exaggerated words or ideals used for emphasis and not to be taken literally. Example: "I've told you a million times not to call me a liar!"

Irony: A trope in which a word or phrase is used to mean the opposite of its literal meaning. Example: "I just love scrubbing the floor."

Litotes: A trope in which one makes a deliberate understatement for emphasis. Example: Young lovers are kissing and an observer says: "I think they like each other."

Metaphor: A trope in which a word or phrase is transferred from its literal meaning to stand for something else. Unlike a simile, in which something is said to be "like" something else, a metaphor says something *is* something else. Example: "Debt is a bottomless sea."

Metonymy: A trope that substitutes an associated word for one that is meant. Example: Using "top brass" to refer to military officers.

Oxymoron: A trope that connects two contradictory terms. Example: "Bill is a cheerful pessimist."

Periphrasis: A trope in which one substitutes a descriptive word or phrase for a proper noun. Example: "The big man upstairs hears your prayers."

Personification: A trope in which human qualities or abilities are assigned to abstractions or inanimate objects. Example: "Integrity thumbs its nose at pomposity."

Pun: A play on words in which a homophone is repeated but used in a different sense. Examples: "She was always game for any game."

Rhetorical Question: A trope in which the one asks a leading question. Example: "With all the violence on TV today, is it any wonder kids bring guns to school?"

Simile: A trope in which one states a comparison between two things that are not alike but have similarities. Unlike metaphors, similes employ "like" or "as." Example: "Her eyes are as blue as a robin's egg."

Synecdoche: A trope in which a part stands for the whole. Example: "Tom just bought a fancy new set of wheels."

Zeugma: A trope in which one verb governs several words, or clauses, each in a different sense. Example: "He stiffened his drink and his spine."

Burke's Pentad (Dramatism)

Kenneth Burke developed a critical technique called dramatism¹. The foundation of dramatism is the concept of motive: the reasons why people do the things they do. Burke

believed that all of life was drama (in the sense of fiction), and we may discover the motives of actors (people) by looking for their particular type of motivation in action and discourse. He set up a "pentad," which are five questions to ask of any discourse to begin teasing out the motive. You may recognize these questions as similar to the six news reporter's questions: who, what, when, where, why, and how.

1. **Act:** What happened? What is the action? What is going on? What action; what thoughts?
2. **Scene:** Where is the act happening? What is the background situation?
3. **Agent:** Who is involved in the action? What are their roles?
4. **Agency:** How do the agents act? By what means do they act?
5. **Purpose:** Why do the agents act? What do they want?

Of dramatism, Burke said: "If action, then drama; if drama, then conflict; if conflict, then victimage.

1: Burke, Kenneth. 1945. A Grammar of Motives. Berkeley: U of California P, 1969

Propaganda

Propaganda is a systematic propagation of a doctrine, ideology, or idea of value to the speaker. I think the key word in that definition is "systematic." Merely stating an ideology or doctrine does not constitute propaganda. The ideology or doctrine must be spread through a system of communication events with the long-term goal of getting the audience to adopt a new way of thinking.

The term is often used pejoratively to describe attempts to move public opinion in a way, or to a position, that the critic doesn't like. One person's propaganda is another's cogent discourse. We should, however, put a finer point on the definition. We may evaluate a message as propaganda when we detect that the speaker is trying to deceive more than to persuade (understanding that this, too, is a judgment call)..

One of the ways propaganda may be identified is through the systematic use of these common fallacies:

1. **Ad Hominem:** This is argument "against the person," also known as "name-calling." This fallacy signals propaganda when it is used to label people in order to box them off into categories. For example, always using the adjective "arch"

before the noun "conservative" is often a sign of a systematic intent to stereotype the individual so described.

2. **Either/or:** This is the fallacy that there are only two positions in a given argument or only two approaches to a given situation. Life is more complicated than such simplistic dichotomies lead us to believe.
3. **Ad Populum:** This is argument "to the people," in which the speaker appeals to mass emotions. This fallacy often requires the use of generalized or abstract terms that have more emotional appeal than substance, e.g. patriotism, socialism, motherhood, radical, public-spirited. A related fallacy is called the "bandwagon," in which the speaker appeals to the audience's desire to be part of a particular group.
4. **Transference:** The speaker uses the thoughts of a venerable or symbolic figure to bolster a contemporary position, e.g. claiming that George Washington would have approved of a certain "bipartisan" maneuver because he warned against the dangers of faction (party).
5. **Stacking the Deck:** One stacks the deck when he/she leaves out relevant information, tells half-truths, exaggerates, or otherwise tampers with the facts. We often see this technique used in the presenting of statistics and polling results.
6. **Opinion as Fact:** The danger of stating opinion as fact is most acute when the propagandist is making a report of an observed event and using adjectives or adverbs to spin the observations, e.g. "The candidate spoke *convincingly* about his tax program."

For more information about Propaganda, try the [Propaganda Critic](#).
